

A Lifetime of Concern



Mrs. Nellie Grier

"Extending a helping hand," has become a life-long tradition of Mrs. Nellie Grier, devout church worker and community leader. A senior citizen of the Newark community, Mrs. Grier at 75 is a tall, vivacious and active member of numerous social and civic organizations.

She has traveled with the renowned "Wings Over Jordan Gospel Choir," and became famous throughout the gospel singing world of Florida because of her beautiful mezzo soprano voice. She even organized her own gospel chorus, the "Miami Master Singers" which won wide acclaim. Mrs. Grier recalls that on one occasion when the Miami Master Singers performed a concert in Belle Glade, Florida, extra guards had to be called out to protect her singers from the wild cheering crowd that had gathered at the bus station.

Mrs. Grier, who has worked as a dress maker, is a member of Zion Hill Baptist Church and has held the position of Grand Matron of the Eastern Star Women's Auxiliary of King Williams Grand Lodge of Masons for 18 years.

Born on a share cropper plantation in Stoneboro, Georgia, in 1901, she became accustomed to hard work through picking cotton and helping her father to clear new land from "can't see to can't use."

Vivid memories of living conditions in the old South served to make Mrs. Grier's sense of responsibility to her people. At the tender age of five she witnessed the horrifying murder-burning of two young black men accused of killing a plantation owner who had tried to force them to remain as slaves and work without pay on his plantation.

A second incident of violence that remains in her memory to this day is the hanging of a young pregnant black woman by an angry white mob. Mrs. Grier explained, "When the young woman's husband came to make settlement for his share of the harvested cotton crop, the plantation owner threatened him with death and told him to take his wife and get off the plantation before sundown. Soon to become a father, the frustrated and heartbroken young man took matters into his own hands. Within hours the young farmer was being hauled by a lynch mob of whites for the murder of the plantation

landlord. When the murder-bent mob could not catch the accused, they turned on the young wife, beat and dragged her out into the open then hanged her." The dangling, lifeless body of the young woman cemented Mrs. Grier's feelings of compassion for the poor and downtrodden.

Married in Georgia in 1918, Mrs. Grier moved with her family of six children to Jacksonville, Florida in 1925. After her husband deserted her in 1927, she moved her family to Liberty City, Florida, a port of Miami. Determined to do what she could to help her people, she accepted a job as a matron in the local black elementary school.

It was not long before she became involved in charitable work among the ill-had children in the area. With the help of a neighborhood church and the Eastern Star women she launched a campaign to collect gifts of clothing for the children. The children were given clothes with instructions to return them to the home of Mrs. Grier where they would be washed and made ready for another wearing.

Sometimes she would buy material and make new clothes for the children. Mrs. Grier says that she was so involved in this activity until she did not take time to ponder the responsibility of parents toward their children.

Moving to Miami years later, Mrs. Grier found the need for organized child-care existent among the young working mothers in her new neighborhood.

In 1942, she founded the Liberty City Day Care Center, the first day care center for black children to be established in Florida.

Meeting the needs of mothers working in war-related industries, the center took in children ranging in age from six months to five years. Mrs. Grier raised money to run the center by charging the mothers fifty cents a week and collecting contributions from neighbors. Consequently, as many as thirty-five children were served one meal a day at the center, which operated from 1942 to 1945.

Mrs. Grier came to Newark with her family in 1954, and immediately joined the City Wide Mission of Newark and vicinity. The mission provides emergency shelter, clothing, furniture and food for impoverished fire victims and members of broken families. Working closely with Mrs. Morgan, the mission's founder and president, Mrs. Grier became vice president of the organization in 1965.

Continuing a life of service to others, Mrs. Grier also worked as a volunteer social worker at South Park Valley Presbyterian Church Senior Citizens Center. She went on to serve as volunteer social worker at Fuld Neighborhood House Senior Citizens Center in 1968, where she was soon promoted to assistant senior citizens director. She was named director in 1971.

Presently, Mrs. Grier is director of Emanuel Day Care Center, probably the first center for disabled senior citizens in the City of Newark.

Mrs. Grier's life which is rich and full with activity has been motivated by a favorite inspirational saying she often quotes, "I have got to stand for right and always stand against the wrong. If in a crowd or if I am alone, if in the street or in my home, I've got to live the life I sing about in my songs."



George Thompson

Man With A Cause

The education of George Thompson extends from the Atlantic Seaboard to the Pacific and back again, from Memphis' Beale Street when W.C. Handy was the reigning blues musician and "Boss" Grump was the omnipotent politician in City Hall to the hot, sultry San Joaquin Valley of California to Newark.

Along the way he befriended the "Wobblies" (members of the shortlived Industrial Workers of the World), "Buster Bailey" (the world's greatest clarinetist), he broke bread in the "Hobo Jungles" with the "bindle stiffs," who roamed the country looking for work. In the process he learned to extrapolate from his experiences as a hobo, busboy, porter, shoe shine boy, and journalist, to the extent that he has an enduring faith in America.

However, despite all of these varied experiences he still thought it necessary to get a degree in journalism from Rutgers' Livingston College, and a masters in African and Latin American History from Rutgers University, and study Russian literature 46 years later.

Though 75, he has not paused. Last month he added another milestone to his varied career by becoming a PEOPLEPOWER writer.

"I feel that I now have the opportunity to utilize my education at this point in my life."

Thompson's early education was in the public schools of pre-World War I Memphis, Tenn. But his family moved to St. Louis and East St. Louis before young Thompson received his high school diploma from Sumner High, at that time one of the area's most prestigious black schools whose teaching staff was loaded with black college professors.

"Many of them were Ph.D.'s. Whoever heard of a Ph.D. teaching high school in those days? But it paid better than black colleges back then."

His family was poor, so young Thompson had to work as a busboy, waiter or shoe shine boy to support himself through school.

"Sometimes, I'd make \$2-a-night waiting tables at the Statler in St. Louis."

These were the days when being poor did not have a stigma attached to it. It was merely a condition which one learned to live with. However, at Sumner, through the zealousness of its teachers, every student was college bound by the time they were ready to graduate.

In January 1921, George Thompson stood proudly among his fellow graduates in a suit loaned to him by one of his teachers.

"Didn't bother me in the least. All I cared about was that I was graduating, and one of my teachers wrote on my record that I was University of California or Stanford material."

But he was penniless.

"I just couldn't get it out of my mind that I had been recommended to one of the finest colleges in the country."

But he did have a cousin who was a "professional hobo," who induced him to "hobo" to California. "Hoboining meant catching the first thing smoking going in the right direction."

"I learned a lot on that trip. We rode box cars and gondolas, and my cousin knew just when to jump off to avoid the railroad dicks. We visited 'hobo jungles,' and I met my first Wobblies, and the 'harvest hobs,' 'bindle stiffs' who followed the harvest often with five, six or seven thousand dollars in their pockets."

By the time the freight train reached the outskirts of Modesto, Calif., Thompson was tired of the hot, stuffy freight cars. He slipped away while his cousin was foraging for food, and found work as a porter/shoe shine boy in a barber shop. When his cousin caught up with him later that day he had found a place to stay, so his cousin journeyed on to Fresno.

"As soon as I heard they were going to open a junior college in Modesto I was the first black to apply. Most blacks out there had never even gone to high school."

But he became lonely and frustrated after a semester and packed up and hoboed back to East St. Louis, taking life pretty much as it came.

In Pueblo, Colo., "I was pulled off the train by the train dicks and locked up. The next morning they brought me before the judge and I told them I was a student

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